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ABSTRACT

The effects of the amounts, sources, and kinds of support available to adolescent mothers on their patterns of interactions with their children are examined in this study. Subjects were 50 adolescent mothers ranging in age from 15 to 19 years and selected from the 1978-79 birth records of a mixed rural/suburban county in the outskirts of Washington, D.C. Data were obtained through a structured interview in the subject's home. To measure the independent variable, social support, researchers asked the mothers to describe the amounts and sources of support they received in the categories of task performance, information/guidance, material aid, and emotional support. Measures of the dependent variable, maternal role behavior, included Rohner's Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire, designed to measure maternal behaviors in the areas of warmth/affection, aggression/hostility, neglect/indifference and rejection. Two other measures, called Maternal Role Satisfaction and Attitude Toward Child Development, were also used. Results indicate that the amount of support for adolescent mothers is the most consistent predictor of maternal behavior, with emotional support being the most significant kind. Results further indicate that relatives and a male partner were the most important sources of support. (Author/JA)

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The Influence of Support Systems on the Maternal Behavior of Young Mothers

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The Influence of Support Systems
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The participants in this symposium have been instrumental in developing a data base which documents the impact of supportive social systems on maternal role performance. Our research has, in general, reported that being embedded in an active support system is positively related to maternal mental health and negatively related to the frequency of restrictive, demanding, and rejecting interactions with children. Having established the importance of social support we now need to continue to take a close look at the characteristics of effective support systems. For example, special attention needs to be paid to the three main dimensions of amount, sources and types of support.

The relative contribution of family, friends and social institutions as sources of support remains one unresolved issue. On the one hand census data has been used to argue that the American family is fragmented, without the support of kin and forced to rely on institutional resources (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). On the other hand similar data is put in an historical context and interpreted to mean that families are functioning much as they always have to provide complex patterns of assistance which only occasionally involves living under the same roof (Bane, 1976). Empirical studies tend to uphold the latter position, indicating that the extended family is an important resource with aid commonly being in the form of help during illness, financial assistance, childcare or gift giving (Albrecht, 1954; Cannon-Bonventre & Kahn, 1979; Hill,1970; Reiss, 1962).

The role of friends and institutions is less clearly defined. We have some evidence that friends provide task assistance and emotional

support (Cohen, 1977; Booth, 1972; Komorovsky, 1962) which may supplement rather than replace family aid (Croog, Lipson & Levine, 1972; Rosow, 1967) particularly when family members no longer live in close proximity to one another. In contrast to families and friends, institutions appear to be the least preferred source of assistance, being used when individual resources fail or are inadequate (Croog, Lipson & Levine, 1972; Quarantelli, 1960).

In addition to a clearer understanding of the circumstances under which these sources of assistance supplement or replace each other distinction must be made among the most important kinds of support provided by each source. Because there is no widely accepted definition of support authors variously include either objective or subjective measures of task assistance, interpersonal transactions, emotional support, concrete aid, appraisals or information (Cobb, 1976; Caplan, 1974; Pinneau, 1975). As a result studies have limited comparability and the relative importance of the various forms of support remains unclear.

Finally, evidence on the amount of support needed by families in various life conditions needs to be expanded. We have published reports on supports for families facing acute crises such as death or long term stresses such as poverty. Projects currently underway will provide information on a range of family situations both here and abroad. However, the changing characteristics of American families demand that we expand our research base to include father-headed families, families that care for the elderly, and families headed by teenage parents.

For example, despite the fact that 20 percent of American children are born to girls still in their teens we know very little about the

relationship between their support systems and their maternal role behavior. What we do know suggests that young parents are at risk and have a special need for support. We know that adolescent parents are under a great deal of stress from unemployment, poverty and marital disruption (Furstenberg, 1976; Card & Wise, 1978). Socially, young mothers are isolated since they have dropped out of school, lack an active social life, and feel cut off from their friends (DeLissovoy, 1975; Malmquist, 1966; Vincent, 1961). As parents adolescents have been described as impatient, insensitive, irritable and prone to use physical punishment with their children (DeLissovoy, 1973). While it has been suggested that this intolerance and social isolation may eventually take the extreme form of child abuse (Bolton, 1980) others contend that some adolescents overcome their handicaps and are able to be competent mothers (Williams, 1974; Furstenberg, 1976). The research being reported today sought an explanation for this reported variation in the maternal behavior of young mothers. We hypothesized that amount, sources and kinds of support available to young mothers would be related to their patterns of interactions with their children.

The instrument employed to measure the independent variable, social support, proceded by asking the mothers to describe the amounts and sources of support they received in the categories of task performance, information/guidance, material aid, and emotional support. Measures of the dependent variable, maternal role behavior, included Rohner's (1975) Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ) which is designed to measure maternal behaviors in the areas of warmth/affection, aggression/hostility, neglect/indifference and rejection. Maternal Role Satisfaction, defined as the mother's gratifications and frustrations in the mothering role was measured by response to statements such as, "Being a mother is much more difficult than I expected." The final measure, Attitude toward Child Development

measures the mother's understanding of the developmental needs of children and included the statement, "If infants are picked up whenever they cry it will spoil them."

The subjects were selected from the 1978 and 1979 birth records of a mixed rural/suburban county located on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. Attempts were made to contact all adolescents who had given birth during those years. The data being reported today is based on interviews with fifty adolescent mothers who were an average age of 15.6 years when their first child was born. At the time of the interview the ages of the mothers ranged from 15 to 19 years with an average age of 17.9 years. The majority had one child between the ages of one and three years (86%), had not completed their high school education (58%) and were unemployed (76%). Twenty-eight percent of the sample was married while seventy-two percent was single, separated, or divorced. Fifty-six percent of the sample was White, forty-four percent was Black. Forty-eight percent of the sample was on welfare while others were supported by their husbands (28%), their parents (12%) or their own income. Data were obtained by means of a structured interview in the respondent's home.

Results

For the young mothers in our sample the most consistent predictor of their maternal role behavior was the total amount of support they received (see Table 1). With high levels of support the mothers were more affectionate; showing their love by comforting, cuddling, playing with and praising their children. With low levels of support the mothers tended to be hostile, indifferent and rejecting of their children. In addition they were more often dissatisfied with their maternal role and showed little understanding of the developmental needs of children.

Table 1 about here

When kinds of support are considered, emotional support is found to be most clearly related to maternal behavior (Table 1). With high levels of emotional support the mothers in our sample reported being less aggressive; less likely to nag, scold, ridicule, or threaten their children. They were also less rejecting, more likely to understand the developmental needs of their children and to be satisfied with their maternal role.

These relationships were the strongest when the adolescent's own family was the source of emotional assistance (see Table 2). The adolescent's behavior was the most positively affected when she felt she had a close family which she could count on for help; when she felt that she could talk to her parents, when her parents treated her like an adult and when there was no conflict over the way the adolescent was raising her child (Table 3).

Tables 2 & 3 about here

Next in order of importance was emotional support from a partner or spouse (Table 2). Interactions with children were more positive when the adolescent and her partner found time to do things together at home and to talk over important issues (Table 3). It was also crucial for the adolescent to be able to feel that she could communicate with her partner, that she could count on her partner when she had a problem, and that her partner was interested in her child. Finally, if the partner expected more from the relationship than he was willing to give in return the mother-child interaction was more negative and the mother less satisfied in her role.

Although friends were a much less effective source of emotional support when friends offered support the mothers were more satisfied with their maternal role performance, less aggressive and less rejecting. These relationships were strongest when the mothers felt positive about their relationships with their friends and felt that they could count on their friends when they needed help (Table 3).

Looking at the category of task assistance, we see that unlike many adult mothers who feel overwhelmed by the pressures of housework, 76% of the young mothers in our sample saw few problems with the tasks of laundry, cleaning, cooking, shopping and routine care of their children. This may be understood in light of the fact that adolescents lived with an average of four other adults most commonly their parents (58%) or a male partner (32%).

Indeed the amount of housework the adolescents actually performed was related to these living arrangements. The number of people the mothers lived with, which ranged up to eight other adults was strongly related to the total amount of task assistance they received ($r=.67$, $p < .001$). In a similar manner those who were either in school ($r=.24$, $p < 05$) or employed ($r=.29$, $p < 05$) were likely to perform fewer household tasks than those who were home with their children. Overall, the young mothers reported that they had the main responsibility for doing the laundry, housework and watching their children while they received the most assistance in the categories of cooking, shopping, and playing with the children.

Although total task assistance is unrelated to maternal role performance (see Table 1) when specific tasks are considered some significant findings emerge. When mothers received little or no help with the housework they were likely to direct their anger or resentment at their child ($r=.37$, $p < .01$) and to view their child as a burden rather than a pleasure ($r=.28$, $p < 05$). Doing the laundry without assistance is related to withdrawing warmth and affection from the child ($r=.30$, $p < .05$). When the young mothers felt they received little assistance in caring for the child they were less likely to be spontaneously warm and affectionate ($r=.31$, $p < .01$) and more likely to be rejecting ($r=.25$, $p < .05$).

The mothers were also asked if they could count on a period of time each day when someone else would assume responsibility for their children's

care (child care Table 1). Mothers who were able to break the continuous contact with their children for more than two hours a day, usually because they were working, were warmer and less rejecting of their children.

Not all sources of task assistance were equally important to adolescent mothers (see Table 2). The most effective source of task assistance was the adolescent's husband or boyfriend. When the adolescents had a male partner who was involved in daily task performance and routine care of their children the mothers were less aggressive; less critically impatient, irritable or antagonistic toward their children. They were also less neglectful and rejecting. These mothers were more likely to enjoy having their children around them and to take them into consideration when they made plans. Without assistance from their male partner the mothers were more likely to ignore their children as long as the children did not do anything to disturb them, to wonder if they really loved their children and to feel that their children were a burden. Task assistance from friends and relatives was related to the single category of being less neglectful.

Material, financial and community services support had only a limited relationship to maternal behavior. Material support, receiving things for self, children and household, was related to higher levels of satisfaction with the maternal role while financial and community services support were associated with attitudes toward childrearing which included the belief that picking up a crying infant spoils the infant, that a child should be toilet trained by 18 months and that children should obey without having rules explained to them.

There was no relationship between the amount of information and advice the young mothers received and their maternal role performance.

Discussion

The data verified the hypotheses that variations in the amount, sources

and kinds of support impact on the maternal behavior of adolescent mothers. For the sample under consideration the amount of support was the most consistent predictor of maternal behavior. Total amount of support received was in turn related to the contact the teenagers had maintained with their own parents ($r=.58$ $p<.001$). When the young mothers continued to live with their parents after their children were born the mothers were more likely to share routine daily tasks ($r=.48$ $p<.001$), to receive monetary assistance ($r=.46$ $p<.001$) and things for themselves and their children ($r=.24$ $p<.05$) as well as more emotional support ($r=.28$ $p<.05$).

Although the overall amount of support is important we have seen that not all kinds of support have an equally positive impact on mother-child interaction. Support that provides money, goods and services is almost totally unrelated to maternal behavior. The one relationship we did find indicates a negative impact of financial and community services support on attitudes toward childrearing. When adolescent mothers have little money of their own and must rely on welfare or their relatives for financial assistance they are more likely to hold the beliefs that children must be quickly brought under parental control and that children should obey their parents without questions. It is possible that when mothers have little objective control over their own lives this situation is reflected in their interactions with their children. Being controlled by the external circumstances in their lives such mothers may attempt in turn to exert control in the only way available to them, by making sure that their children obey them quickly and consistently.

The relationship between daily task assistance and mother-child interaction is even more complex. In agreement with previous research (Longfellow et al., 1979) we found no relationship between total task assistance and mother-child interaction. When we broke the correlations down by specific tasks we discovered that the teenagers as a group felt responsibile for the

completion of some tasks while considering others outside their domain. When the teenagers felt responsible for a specific task, assistance with that task was related to their interactions with their children. When, on the other hand. someone else had the main responsibility for a task such as cooking or shopping, support was unrelated to the teenagers' interactions with their children.

We also saw a hierarchy of sources of support emerging from the data. Relatives and a male partner were clearly the most important sources. When the partner provided task assistance and emotional support and when the family provided emotional support the most positive impact was seen. Friendships had a limited impact on maternal role performance while community services had virtually no impact at all.

The strongest finding from this study was that emotional support is highly related to the adolescent mother's acceptance of her children. The adolescent's capacity for relating to other persons and for obtaining emotional support from them is particularly important at a time when the responsibilities of motherhood have isolated her from her peers and her previous social activities. Without the capacity to develop supportive emotional relationships the young mother is unable to share ambivalent feelings about motherhood, fails to receive reinforcement for the way she is rearing her children and lacks encouragement for her own flagging esteem. Feeling abandoned to a new and frequently overwhelming role the mother who has no one to share her frustrations with turns against the most obvious cause of her problems--her child.

Table 1

Correlations between Kinds of Support, Total Support and Response to Maternal Role

Kinds of Support	PARQ Warmth	PARQ Aggression	PARQ Neglect	PARQ Rejection	PARQ Composite	Role Satisfaction	Attitude Toward Childrearing
Task Assistance	.18	-.15	.07	-.17	-.09	.07	.13
Childcare	.24*	-.12	.01	-.26*	-.16	.09	.13
Emotional	.21	-.47***	-.42***	-.44***	-.49***	.27*	.35**
Material	.05	-.13	-.17	-.05	-.16	.26*	.06
Financial	.00	-.04	.12	.03	.06	.04	-.35**
Community Service	.17	.11	.17	.04	.11	.03	-.26*
Information	.05	-.13	.03	-.06	-.04	.15	.09
Total Support	.30*	-.41**	-.25*	-.40**	.41*	.29*	.27*

*p <.05
**p <.01
***p <.001

Table 2

Correlations Between Sources of Support and Response to Maternal Role

Sources	PARQ Warmth	PARQ Aggression	PARQ Neglect	PARQ Rejection	PARQ Composite	Role Satisfaction	Attitude Toward Childrearing
Task Assistance							
Friends	-.01	.08	.26*	.15	.16	.11	-.04
Relatives	.02	.16	.25*	.16	.21	14	-.25*
Partner/Spouse	.17	-.24*	-.36**	-.32**	-.33**	-.05	.33**
Emotional Support							
Friends	.17	-.25*	-.17	-.22	-.26*	.24*	.10
Relatives	.43***	-.56***	-.46***	-.54***	-.57***	.22	.29
Partner/Spouse	.03	-.30*	-.32**	-.27*	-.31**	.21	.33**
Material Support							
Friends	-.22	-.32**	-.26*	-.34**	-.34**	.15	.02
Relatives	.06	.05	-.01	.11	.05	-.03	.08
Partner/Spouse	.14	.00	-.08	.00	-.06	.20	.12
Community Service	.17	.11	.17	.04	.12	.03	-.27*

*p <.05
**p <.01
***p <.001

Table 3

Correlations between Subcategories of Emotional Support and Response to Maternal Role

Categories of Emotional Support	PARQ Warmth	PARQ Aggression	PARQ Neglect	PARQ Rejection	PARQ Composite	Role Satisfaction	Attitude Childrearing
Family							
Count on Family	.24*	-.55***	-.58***	-.60***	-.64***	.25*	.43***
Can Talk to Parents	.11	-.33**	-.38**	-.29**	-.39**	.28*	.39**
Aggreement on Child-rearing	.44***	-.50***	-.31**	-.39**	-.45***	.21	.2[illegible]
Upset Relations Parents	.27**	-.31**	-.10	-.25*	-.26*	.01	.26*
Parents Treat Su as Adult	.16	-.58***	-.43***	-.56***	-.57***	.11	.12
Family Close	.08	-.35**	-.34**	-.38**	-.40**	.17	.17
Friends							
Maintain Contact	.00	-.17	.03	-.13	-.11	.26	.09
Share Activities	.22	-.04	.05	-.06	-.06	.06	.10
Count on Friends	.08	-.26	-.24*	-.27*	-.31**	.21	.04
Have Common Interests	.21	-.16	.03	.01	-.05	.15	.04
Friends want Favors	.08	-.16	-.25*	-.18	-.24*	-.11	.13
Upset With Friends	.02	-.13	-.35**	-.21	-.24*	.27*	-.05
Partner/Spouse							
Go out	-.05	-.22	-.18	-.19	-.18	.17	.26*
Home recreation	.00	-.26*	-.34**	-.27*	-.31**	.14	.34**
Time to Talk	.13	-.30**	-.32**	-.25*	-.30*	.12	.29*
Help with Problems	-.03	-.28*	-.23*	-.27*	-.27*	.26*	.23*
Can Communicate	.02	-.31**	-.36**	-.28*	-.34**	.27*	.33**
Interest in Child	.02	-.29*	-.27*	-.27*	-.30*	.10	.37**
Given as much as expects	.09	-.27*	-.39**	-.22*	-.33**	.28*	.34**

*p <.05
**p <.01
***p <.001

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